

Revival of the Bhikkhuni Order in Sri Lanka

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It is well known that the Bhikkhuni (nuns) order was introduced to Sri Lanka during the reign of King Devanampiyatissa. (BC 250 - 210) Since then this order flourished at Anuradhapura for about 1200 years. With the fall of Anuradhapura to the Cholian invaders in AD 1017 and the annexation of the Anuradhapura Kingdom to the Cholian empire the Bhikkhuni order disappeared and became defunct. The Order of Monks (Bhikkhus) also met the same fate. But was later revived after King Vijayabahu drove away the Cholian invaders. For this revival the King had to get down monks from Burma. But there were no nuns in Burma, Siam, Cambodia or Laos the other four Theravada countries. Hence the monks maintained that the Bhikkhuni order should be considered defunct and not restorable. During the time the Bhikkhuni order existed in Sri Lanka it proved to be an asset to the religion and rendered yeoman service to the Sasana. Details can be found in the Dipawansa on which was modelled the Mahavamsa - the great chronicle in Sinhala history.

After 50 years of Cholian rule, King Vijayabahu coming up from Ruhuna expelled the invaders and assumed rulership over the whole island. He shifted his capital to Polonnaruwa. During the Polonnaruwa period which followed Sinhalese Buddhism came more and more under Tamil, Hindu influence. The Tamil caste system of South India was adopted and the monks took the names of their villages as a prefix to their Pali names given at ordination. The Sangha became the preserve of one caste monopolising the temporalities in imitation of Hindu priesthood. The study of Sanskrit and secular sciences associated with it came into vogue. Anti feminism and casteism were features entrenched in the Manu laws of Hinduism.

Anathema

These features found their way to Sinhalese society and its religion. Therefore, in this milieu the revival of the defunct Bhikkhuni order became anathema to Sinhalese Buddhism. There is permission in the Vinaya Chullavagga for monks to ordain nuns. This permission could easily have been made use of if the monks were willing to restore the Bhikkhuni order. But since their wishes were otherwise and they were more interested in maintaining their monopolies, it suited them to take the casteist and anti feminist line. They enabled them to avert rivalry from low caste men in the Sangha and women in to Bhikkhuni order.

Therefore, from the Polonnaruwa period right up to the British conquest of the island in 1815 no one took up the issue of admitting 'low caste' men to the Sangha and women to the Bhikkhuni order. Priestcraft saw to it that the Buddhist Sangha was the preserve of the high-caste and that women were debarred from leading the holy life of a Bhikkhuni as advocated by the Buddha. The majority of people were ignorant and illiterate. They took their Buddhism from the priestcraft of the Sangha and the Kings who took their advise in matters of religion from the Sangha hierarchy.

Thus, a tradition to the effect that the Bhikkhuni order is defunct and cannot be restored until the appearance of Martie Buddha in a future aeon became accepted. Thereby the teachings of the Buddha on appamada (diligence), samanattama (egalitarianism), Karuna, Metta, Artachariya etc were lost sight of. An anti-feminist dogma prevented women from taking to holy orders in Buddhism. This was the situation from the Polonnaruwa period right up to the time the Sangha - King combine lost their control of the nation in 1815 with the betrayal of the last King to the British.

During the colonial period, under British rule, it was Anagarika Dharmapala who was the pioneer of the Buddhist revival. He opened the first nunnery in modern Ceylon at Darley Lane, Colombo. It was not a success. He was followed by Miss Catherine de Alwis who went to Burma and got ordained there as a Junior Nun without Higher Ordination. She came back to Sri Lanka in 1903 and founded the Dasa Sil Mata order of Buddhist nuns. Thus from 1903 onwards these D.S.M nuns were the vestige and the representatives of the Bhikkhuni Sangha of old. They seemed to believe in the theory that half a loaf is better than no bread. Therefore they had to be satisfied with observing the ten precepts of Junior Nuns or Samaneras.

Many Buddhist leaders among the clergy and the laity realised that the DSM status for nuns was really incongruous and incompatible with the Buddha's concept of a four-fold division among his disciples and devotees.

He recognised only Bhikkhus, Bhikkhunis, male lay devotees and female lay devotees. There is no room for a half way house between lay women devotee and Bhikkhunis such as a Dasa Sil Matas. The later term is an invention by apostates in the Sasana who wish to keep down women renunciates from their proper place as Bhikkhunis.

Among the advocates for the revival of the Bhikkhuni order was Ven. Pandit Narawala Dhammaratana Thero. He had led a delegation to a peace conference in Peking, China. He studied the Bhikkhuni order in China and found that it had been established on a firm Vinaya footing by Sinhalese nuns from Anuradhapura in AD 429.

Chinese nuns

Therefore, in his writings and teachings he advocated the revival of the Bhikkhuni Order with assistance from Chinese Nuns. Other advocates of the revival among our Maha Theras were Ven. Pandit Hedipannala Pannaloka of the Vijalankara Pirivena, Ven. Pandit Henpitagedera Gnanaseeha, Ven. Banbarende Seevali and several other progressives. Among lay Buddhist leaders, Anagarika Dharmapala, Sir D.B. Jayatillaka, H. Sri Nissanka, Dr. G.P. Malalasekera, J.R. Jayewardene and many others encouraged the movement and spoke for it. Among the living sympathizers and advocates were Ven. Mapalagama Vipulasara. Principal, Paramadhamma Chetiya Pirivena, Ven. Pandit Inamaluwe Sumangala of the Dambulla Raja Maha Viharaya, Ven. Talalle Dhammaloka, Anunayaka Thero of the Amarapura Sect, Ven Dr. Kirinde Dhammananda, Ven. Pandit Pathagama Gnanarama retired Principal Sudharmakara Pirivena, Panadura, Ven. Porawagama Soma, Ven. Deegala Mahinda, Tembilyane Ariyadhamma etc.

While the progressive monks called for and advocated the revival there were reactionaries, conservatives and obscurantists who took the traditional stand in Sinhalese Buddhism as a dogma, equating it with 'pure Theravada Buddhism'. Thus there was division of opinion in the two camps, the conservatives sticking to traditional anti-feminism and the progressives calling for a revision of the traditional stand and a restoration of the Bhikkhuni Order.

As a sequel to the public interest created on this question Ven. M. Vipulasara, Principal, Parama Dhamma Chetiya Pirivena and President Mahabodhi Society came forward with the assistance of the World Sangha Council and Sakyadhita International Organisation of Buddhist Women and held an ordination ceremony on 8.12.96 at Saranath Temple, India. This was a grand and historic ceremony - a red letter day in the annals of Theravada Buddhism. At this ceremony 11 selected Sinhalese DSM nuns were ordained fully as Bhikkhunis by a team of Theravada monks in concert with a quorum of Korean Nuns. Thus for the first time after 980 odd years the Theravada Bhikkhuni Order was revived in India.

Sasanodaya Society

For the first time since the disappearance, the Bhikkhuni Order was restored at Saranath India on 8.12.96. The Sinhalese Nuns who received their Bhikkhuni Ordination there came back to Sri Lanka after one year and two months at the invitation of the Bhikkhuni Sasanodaya Society, Dambulla. On Medin Poya Day (12/3/98) they ordained 23 selected Sinhalese DSM Nuns into the Bhikkhuni Sangha.

This ordination was confirmed and ratified by a quorum of the Theravada Sangha as required in the Vinaya. Ven. Inamaluwe was the director of the function and the master of ceremonies. He was assisted by Ven. Mapalagama Vipulasara, Galkadawela Punnasara, Pandit Tallalle Dhammananda Anu Nayakam, Ven. Prof. K. Vajira and Porwagama Soma and a few others.

Thus for the first time since the Anuradhapura days the Bhikkhuni Sasana has been revived in Sri Lanka According to full Theravada ceremonial. Sinhalese DSM nuns, Buddhist women feminists and other advocates of the restoration of the Bhikkhuni Sasana will have the satisfaction that one of their cherished dreams for the Buddha Sasana has been realised.

Sri Lanka became the caretaker and headquarters of Theravada Buddhism since it was expelled from India. Other Theravada countries such as Siam, Burma, Laos, and Cambodia has never had a Bhikkhuni Order. There are movements in these countries for the admission of women to the Bhikkhuni Sangha in the Theravada tradition to which they belong. These countries border China and they see that in China Bhikkhunis have been existing from the earliest days of the introduction of Buddhism to that land.

Hence, their aspiration for entry to the Bhikkhuni Sangha will receive a fillip on hearing and seeing that the Theravada Bhikkhuni Order has been established in Sri Lanka. Though the Bhikkhuni Order had never been introduced to any country except Sri Lanka, Burma is an unusual exception. It had originally been a Mahayana country. Therefore during the Mahayana days there were Bhikkhunis in Burma. But once it was converted to Theravada Buddhism the Bhikkhuni Order there became unrecognised. Hence there continued to be the nuns with only

Samaneri Ordination under the Ten Precepts. Even today the position is the same. It is from these Samaneri nuns (called Ma-Theelas) that Sri Lanka received its DSM order of nuns.

Now that the Theravada Bhikkhuni Order has been established in Sri Lanka it should be a matter of time for women renunciates in these countries to come to Sri Lanka, or get down Sri Lankan nuns to their countries and establish the Bhikkhuni Order in their lands. Admittance to the Bhikkhuni Order to women was granted by the Buddha himself. Womens' rights are a part of human rights in the modern world.

Therefore, the Bhikkhuni Order in Sri Lanka should be the spearhead for the movement to establish the Theravada Bhikkhuni Order in these lands. The Bhikkhuni Order cannot function properly in poor and backward cultures which do not recognise women's rights. That is why even in some backward Mahayana countries such as Mongolia, Kirghizia and Tibet there never has been a Bhikkhuni Order. Now that Sri Lanka is emerging from a backward Third World country with a poor record of human rights to a modern democracy which recognises women's rights the prospects of the Bhikkhuni Order gaining its rightful place as in the Anuradhapura period are bright and full of promise.

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